**Between our pages**

Episode 7 with Tracey Dembo

[0:00] Music.

[0:10] fiona: Welcome, you're listening to Between Our Pages, a Premier's Reading Challenge WA podcast.

This episode was recorded on Whadjuk Noongar land. We acknowledge the traditional custodians and pay respects to the elders past, present and emerging.

My name is Fiona Bartholomaeus and together we'll be diving into the wonderful world of books and reading right here in WA.

Today we're chatting with Tracey Dembo, a corporate lawyer and now author, about her first ever children's picture book called 'An A to Z of Dreaming Differently'.

Let's go.

Music.

Fiona: 'An A to Z of Dreaming Differently' is a new picture book with beautiful illustrations and 26 positive messages of affirmations and encouragements for children.

The book teaches children to be themselves, shout their ideas from the rooftop, and that it's okay when things don't go to plan.

It's the first ever book from Tracey Dembo and is certainly a positive feel-good title.

Tracy, thanks so much for joining me.

Tracey: Thank you so much for having me.

Fiona: So on your website, you describe yourself as a professional daydreamer, word tamer, and puddle jumper. I love that description.

Tracey: Thank you. Yeah, well, writing kids' books is about having fun, and I think you have to have that fun part of you alive at all times, yeah.

Fiona: And you are a corporate lawyer, and it doesn't seem like the typical profession for a daydreamer and a puddle jumper who gets involved in mischief and nonsense.

Tracey: Yeah, well, you know, I have a secret double identity. Yeah, I mean, I've done law for many years, and I am a lawyer and also a director of community organisation.
So I sat on the board of Playgroup WA for a few years and also more recently on the Perth College Foundation Board.

So I guess those two parts of me. They are separate, but I guess it's those skills and those interests that also feed into my own writing.

Fiona: Kind of intertwined a little bit.

Tracey: Yeah, I mean you have to be a bit of a wordsmith in law. You're constantly analysing what sentences mean and writing.

And I guess my focus as a director has been particularly on children's education, particularly play-based education. So I have a real passion for that and I think that feeds into my writing too.

Fiona: So what made you decide to write a book and specifically a children's book?

[2:40] tracey: Well, I guess it all started sometime after my second daughter was born. I was reading a lot of picture books, but the idea, and I started writing them. I think I naturally gravitated towards them because it was what I was reading, but also what I love, I feel like there's something really magical about kids' books and particularly pictures books, because I feel like they're a kid's first introduction into the world of reading, and there's that synergy between the words and the text, which is really powerful, and also that connection, I guess, between the reader and the person who's being read to.

So I was gravitating towards those, I was writing those, but what made me write this particular one? Well, it was actually inspired by another book that a well-meaning adult had given to my then four-year-old daughter, and it was basically a book about following the rules. And this particular book, it was one of those quite old-fashioned and I guess didactic books where the main character is taught a lesson that rules are there to be followed and that there are severe consequences if you don't.

And so I was sitting there reading it to my daughter and I looked down at her next to me and I thought, you know this is a kid who is always trying to do the right thing. So much so that she was often afraid to put her hand up in class to ask for really simple things.

And so I was sitting there reading her this book and I looked at her next to me I just felt this intense visceral reaction stir up inside of me and it took me a moment to realize that what I was experiencing was, I guess, anger or rage and I sort of said to myself, "why such a strong reaction to this book? You know, what is making you angry?" and I realised that the answer to that was basically because the book about following the rules was the exact sort of book she did not need at that point in time.

What she actually needed was a book that did the opposite, that told her that her voice mattered, that it was okay to speak out and that she didn't need to shrink or conform herself to fit in.

And I felt that she was already getting enough messages from society about that, she actually needed something to encourage her to speak up and so that's how 'An A to Z of Dreaming Differently' was basically born.

Fiona: And that encouragement really does go into this book. I've read it myself and it's absolutely beautiful, all 26 of the messages. Can you tell us a little bit about what you might see in the book and read in the book if you pick it up?

[5:15] tracey: Yeah, well, it's basically an alphabet book with a difference and so it's a joyous and feisty celebration of thinking big ideas and asking big questions and basically being yourself without apology. And so some of the messages that it has in it are things like, 'it's okay to be different and to think differently'. 'It's okay to be yourself, it's okay to take up space' and you know, it's basically about trusting your own instincts and following your own dazzling path.

Sometimes that might mean saying no to a bully or to someone else who's not being nice to you. At other times, it might mean doing something that lights you up inside, even if it's not what everyone else is doing. And so it's really ultimately about living courageously without constraints or limitations.

Fiona: What made you decide to write it in the A-to-Z format?

[6:08] tracey: Well, because it was a book about following the rules, it occurred to me that every child has to learn the alphabet. It's basically a set of rules that needs to be followed.
And so I thought, what better way to subvert the rules than to follow a set of rules in doing so?

Fiona: I love that.

Tracey: Yeah. And it just seemed to me to be something, it's basically about all the good things we should know growing up about ourselves. And so in a way, it's sort of a list or a rule book of all those things I could think of.

Fiona: So how did you tackle coming up with the messages for each letter? Did you start at A and work to Z or did you just have ones pop up and you just went wherever you went?

Tracey: Oh look, the opening line just popped into my head and that's sort of how it went from there.

You know, it starts off by saying "A is for attitude, may you have bucket loads of a kid" and from there just, yeah, ideas just kept circulating in my brain and it kind of went from there.

Fiona: I think my favourite one is Z, "that some days will zig, some will zag, and some will zip all over the place". Some of the messages in here are relevant to anyone, not just kids.

Tracey: Yeah, I think, like I said, it's the things that we should grow up knowing about ourselves and so the idea is that it is relevant for everyone, and it's relevant for all ages of children too. You'll see that the characters in the book are slightly older kids, so it's not necessarily a picture book just designed for five-year-olds. It's designed to, I guess, have broad ranging appeal.

Fiona: Why is it a book children should read in today's world?

[7:40] tracey: Because basically it gives you a big flood of feel-good each and every time you pick it up.

Like I said, it's all about being yourself and you know, even if that means being unique or different and it's just filled with messages around that and about trusting your own instincts, that you're good enough, that it's okay to use your voice and that your voice really matters. And I guess the other reason why people should pick it up is because of Lucia's absolutely incredible pictures.

She's done the most amazing, gorgeous pictures for this book and they are so clever because while they broadly follow the themes of the text, at the same time she's created this whole another story visually through the pictures, basically about four friends who are there to pick each other up as they each navigate their own up and down journey towards their own dazzling dreams.

And she does them by hand with pencil and acrylic and the result is you just want to dive in and pore over every detail. You'll see that there's lots of space themes throughout the book, so there's all these little hidden astronauts, hidden rocket ships throughout the book. There's really a lot to look at apart from the words themselves, and I think that makes it a beautiful, beautiful book.

[9:00] fiona: The art is absolutely beautiful. I really like all the colours and design and all the characters. What was the process like of putting art to your words? Did you have to plan what it would look like while you were writing the text?

Tracey: For this particular text, the words really just came into my head separately from the pictures.

I guess each picture book text is different. You know, sometimes you do need to put in the illustration notes to specify, you know, in detail what's going on, you know, if the words aren't saying that.

I had some rough ideas, I think, from memory about, you know, we could have some kids doing various things, but I wasn't particularly prescriptive about it and I'm not sure, I don't even know if she actually saw those notes in the end.

Yeah, the process of actually putting it together, once Lucia had agreed to do this book, she came up with a whole lot of of character sketches and ideas, and I worked with the publisher, I had some input into those early ideas and then she went from there. And I guess because she does it by hand, it was important to get the feel of it right because it's a lot harder to alter hand-drawn images.

[10:13] So yeah, that's how it came to be.

Fiona: Did you ever find that some of her earlier sketches or even the ones later inspired or changed what you had written or planned to write?

Tracey: Oh, it's more amazing than I could have ever imagined in terms of elevating the story, but yes, there were a couple of lines that we found, we changed throughout it because I guess once you see everything together you want to make it work on the page, both visually, so you want to make sure there's enough space and that it works with the actual words you see visually, but also, I guess, emotionally and making sure that they connect to the pictures. But there were only a few sort of lines we tweaked in that process I guess.

Fiona: And it is your first book, do you have any others planned or in the works quietly?

Tracey: Yeah it's very exciting because I have a second picture book coming out with a firm press in late September just in time for Christmas and I haven't yet been able to speak about that one so here's the world exclusive.

It is called 'This Book is a Time Machine' and it's illustrated by the fabulous Lucinda Gifford and it's quite different from this book.

It's essentially a slightly chaotic and riotously fun exploration of ideas about time and I think what's interesting about it is that it's a meta book that breaks the fourth wall so Lucinda and I are both actually characters in the book.

Fiona: I love that so much.

Tracey: Yeah, we've had so much fun making it and yeah I can't wait to share more with everyone.

Fiona: And time and space and all that is such a popular topic with not only adults but obviously kids as well so I reckon kids will love it.

Tracey: Yeah, I'm hoping they do. Again, Lucinda is just a genius. So her pictures just take my little text and take it up to a whole different level and I think everyone will love what is going on in that book.

Fiona: With the Premier's Reading Challenge underway for 2023, how important has reading been in your life?

Tracey: Oh, it's so, so important. I mean, I was one of those kids whose nose was permanently in a book. For me, they were something magical, a way to transport to other worlds, to other perspectives.

Yeah, just they open your eyes and help you look at the world differently and throughout my whole life, they've been so important. And I guess now as a writer, they remain just as important, not just for the enjoyment of them. But I guess for me, as a writer to help develop my craft by reading lots of other writers I get to learn about different ways of thinking.

They do something where they just light up a part of your brain and make it fizz inside and I think that's just so important to me.

Fiona: Yeah books are a real insight to not only different places, times and characters, but also like you were saying into the writers themselves and the topics that are close to their hearts and how they write.

Tracey: Yeah, absolutely.

Fiona: Before we let you go I'm going to ask you a couple of rapid fire questions.

Tracey: Oh no.

Fiona: I just want the first answer that that comes into your head.

Tracey: Okay.

Fiona: What is your favorite book?

Tracey: Oh, do you have to name a favorite child? I really love 'The Handmaid's Tale' by Margaret Atwood, but also 'A Heart So White' by the Spanish author Javier Marias. Those would probably be up there, my two favorite adult books.

Kids books would be much harder because I love so many.

Fiona: So what are you reading at the moment?

Tracey: I'm actually reading Margaret Atwood's latest book of short stories, 'Old Babes in the Wood' and I just finished reading 'The Princess Bride' by William Goldman.

Fiona: Love it. Non-fiction or fiction?

Tracey: Both, probably.

Fiona: Favourite genre?

Tracey: I just read across everything. I think adult-wise probably literary fiction but I don't want to limit myself, and kids-wise I just read across everything.

Fiona: And in the spirit of the Premier's Reading Challenge, how many books do you hope to read in 2023?

Tracey: Again, that's a hard one. I think adult books, probably about 20, but I read a lot of kids' books, so I would say close to 200. So can I say 220? That sounds like a nice round number, maybe.

[14:39] Music.

[14:48] fiona: You've been listening to Between Our Pages, a Premier's Reading Challenge WA podcast.

Thanks to our guest Tracey Dembo for joining me on this episode.

If you want to keep up to date about future podcast episodes, you can follow the Premier's Reading Challenge Facebook and Instagram pages and Premier's Reading Challenge WA.

Thank you for listening, happy reading, we'll see you next time.

[15:08] Music.